

MEMORIES OF THE OLD FIELD SCHOOL DAYS OF FIFTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

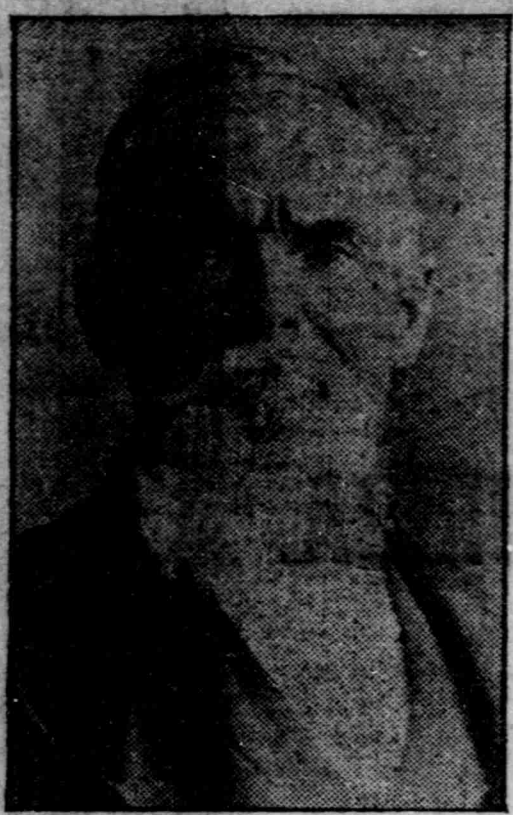
BY PROF. J. M. TATE

At the close of a balmy day in November, wife and I sat on the front porch of our humble home enjoying the beauties of an Indian summer's sunset, and which can be seen in perfection only in the Land of Flowers. The duties of school room and household have been performed, the frugal meal which serves for dinner and supper has been discussed; the little grandson, Billie, has been sent on an errand to a neighbor and we two silver-haired pilgrims who have traveled the journey of life together for forty-five years, settle ourselves in our accustomed places on the front gallery to enjoy in silence the gorgeous tints as they are penciled upon the sky by the disappearing sun.

The autumn leaves have assumed a sombre color, and detach themselves from the parent stems and approach the ground in graceful curves. One leaf, especially from its size and position, has engrossed our attention. It hangs immediately in front—a quivering, aspen-like motion prepares us for its speedy fall. We exclaim in unison: "There goes our leaf!" But no, it has only ceased its gyrations, to cling more tenaciously to the limb. Unconsciously I hum the old-time ballad, "Tis the last rose of summer left blooming alone, all its lovely companions are faded and gone."

Memory Goes Back.
Memory goes back to the time when both of us were in the heyday of life. Names and faces come crowding in parade. We try to locate them. A few gray-haired people like ourselves are left as evidences of God's mercy and providence. A large number have fallen like the autumnal leaves, but the memory of our departed companions lends a pleasant tinge to recollection. We look again to see our leaf. It has fallen and we recognize it amongst others on the ground, by its size and color. We too shall, like the leaves, fall to the ground. The spring of life has passed, summer and autumn in turn have been enjoyed, the wintry days of life have been untried in, and it is but a question of time when we too will exist only in memory.

Children and grand-children have grown to maturity and have gone out to fight the battles of life. Save only our little Billie, there is no one to cheer the quiet household. I see a tear coursing down the grandmother's cheek. My rocker gravitates towards that of the good wife. Our hands are united in sympathetic clasp. I essay to change the mournful situation by recalling the scenes of younger days. Snatches of old half-forgotten songs are sung. "Oh don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt," brings back the smile to her face and together we sing in succession "My Old Kentucky



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Home." "Massa in the Cold, Cold Ground."

Scenes of Antebellum Days.
In better frame of mind we recount the scenes of antebellum days. I see myself a barefoot boy again. Yonder is the modest school house. On its right the cleared space for games of town ball, bull pen, and shinny. On the left, a smaller space for the girls, allotted for jumping the rope, and hopscotch. In the rear is an indigenous growth of scrubby black-jack summers, and scions of hickory trees, the former furnishing with their crooked roots the best shinny sticks in the world while the latter furnished the teachers with the worst implement of correction ever devised. Midway between the grounds is a line of demarcation, which is called the dead-line—for in those days there was no communication between the sexes. I bring my better half to a state of equanimity by recounting the humorous incidents of the old-time playground.

The sun has disappeared; twilight still lingers with its glow of illumination, and I ask: "Is it not time for Billie to return?"
I am answered by a boyish voice singing the popular ballad of the day "School days, school days, dear old golden rule days." We listen, and

wonder why he pauses so often between the words of the song, and why he injects undue emphasis upon notes not authorized by the original. We discover by his zigzag movements that he is kicking his foot ball.
"Come on, Billie," cries his grandmother. "It is time to study your lessons."

He neither hears nor heeds her admonition, but redoubles both his voice and hermetic energy to force the pig skin to the gate.

"Come in, I say," cries his grandmother.
"Sing on, Billie," said I, "kick on Billie—kick while it is called today, for the night cometh when, like me, you cannot kick," and catching the infection of the hour, I sing: "Backward, turn backward, O time in your flight, make me a boy again just for tonight."

Emboldened by my permission as he hears the gate he gives one final kick and in response the ball rose clear of the gate and threatened my position.
"Look out, Billie! You will strike your grandfather!"
No, she is mistaken, it strikes into a tempting position midway between porch and gate.

Fires of Youth Kindled.
As I look at it the fires of youth are kindled anew. I jump from my chair; my legs begin to oscillate like pendulums; my wife raises her hands in protest at my actions. Billie seems to understand me, and with mocking voice cries: "School days," as he fumbles at the gate latch.

I can no longer stand the challenge I forget my three score years and ten. With a Comanche yell, I shout: "Shinny on your own side!" I leap over a flight of four steps, with running kick I send the ball over the gate, over Billie's head, and fully fifty feet down the broad walk. Billie, with taunting cry, rushes after the fleeing ball while I, finding that he is too fleet for me, return panting to my chair. "Have you gone crazy?" asks my wife in astonishment. "No, but I should have been had I resisted the temptation to kick that ball!"

Some Pointed Questions.
It is now dark. Billie is admonished to study his lessons for the morrow. But as he halts on his way he asks suddenly:

"What is moral 'suasion', grandpa?"

"Why—mor—what makes you ask such a strange question?"
"Because our teacher said today that if the new school board did not restore corporal punishment that it would require a deal of moral 'suasion' to save some of the boys from the reformatory. Now what is moral 'suasion', anyhow?"

"Moral 'suasion' is a process of reasoning by which the conscience is reached through the avenues of the intellect—I should have said supposed to be reached. But my idea is that the shortest and most expeditious route is through the epidermis."

"Did you ever receive corporal punishment at school, grandpa?"

"I'm both glad and sorry to say 'yes.'"

"Did she hurt much when she licked you?"

"My teacher was not a she. I never saw or heard of a female teacher in my school days, but you should not use the term licked—there is a more elegant word—chastise."

"Did all of your teachers lick—chastise you, grandpa?"

"Yes, all, and one teacher that was not my teacher."

"How funny it is to hear that your teachers licked—I mean chastised—you. Tell me all about it and I will earn a good report for a month."

Of the Old School.
Well, there were in ante-bellum days three teachers in the south, whose names were held in terror over all obstinate and vicious youths. Bingham, of North Carolina, Beaman, of Georgia, and Morris, of Alabama. The last named taught school in Salem and other places in east Alabama. Wherever he located, I followed, and continued under the tutelage of this admirable teacher until I had mastered a sufficiency of latin and greek to be admitted to the freshman class at college. It was in the '50's of the last century when I returned from the boarding school to enjoy a short vacation before my departure for college. I was passing through that critical period when puberty is changed to manhood and which was then facetiously called "the goosing age." That age when the down begins to appear on the upper lip, and silly concocted ideas in the brain.

I found on my return that a young graduate from Emory college had been engaged to teach the village school. His name was John Westley Rush, and while teaching he was also preparing himself for admission to the Alabama conference. As a bigoted, conceited youth, I began to incite in subordination in his pupils. I would entice the boys to linger on their way to school, and in many ways began to interfere with his authority and discipline. While his school was in session, I would saunter within fifty yards of the academy and fire off both barrels of my muzzle-loader. One morning I was playing marbles before the law office of my uncle, Judge Alfred Reed, when Mr. Rush passed by on his way to the academy. I detained the boys purposely and my uncle,

who carried an immense quantity of humor, concealed under a sober, judicial countenance, overheard our conversation. Coming out of his office, he admonished the boys to go on to school. That he sympathized with them and if they would stop at his office on their return from school that he would unfold a plan whereby they might secure a vacation for the approaching Christmas holidays. I was also requested to be present.

All Were Present.
At the appointed hour we were at his office and found our new friend and fellow conspirator awaiting us. Closing the door, he began in a mysterious whisper to tell us that it was wrong for Rush to continue his school when all other institutions were closed for the holidays; that he intended to help us all he could. Mr. Rush boarded at his home, and it would appear wrong for him to take sides against his boarder.

"Now," he said, going to one of his book cases, and bringing out a package. "I have here means to obtain for you your much desired vacation, but I am to assist, you are to follow implicitly my directions."

This we all solemnly promised to do. He then unrolled the package and we saw displayed before us a claw hammer, several nails of various sizes, some of them being headless, and a box of percussion caps.

"Now, boys, you are to assemble at the schoolroom tomorrow at sunrise. With these nails you are to fasten the doors and windows securely. You being on the inside, will be safe from any attack the teacher may make. But should he manifest any disposition to enter without your consent you are to strike one of these headless nails, which you have previously driven in the door facing, and upon which you have put one of the percussion caps. Rush, hearing the explosion, will think you have firearms and will speedily come to terms. Should he enter the room, two of you are to leg him, while the other two are to seize his arms. He is to be carried to the pump and water pumped on his head until he comes to terms. You are under no circumstances to do him bodily harm. I will arrange to be in the neighborhood, and if everything is not prosperous I will command the peace, and you can escape."

Informed the Teacher.
We repeated our instructions in detail, and Judge Reed dispersed us. I learned afterward that he went straightway to Rush and told him that his scape-grace nephew had stirred up rebellion, and that three boys Alonzo O'Neal, George and Charley Hooper, headed by him, would attempt to turn him (Rush) out the next day. That it would be an act of benevolence to take the conceit out of me before I became a victim for college hazing.

Of course we knew nothing of this treachery, and before sunrise the next day we four boys had securely imprisoned ourselves in the school house. As the time passed slowly on many conjectures about Rush's actions were discussed. "Would he be so frightened as to run before a treaty could be effected?" O'Neal contrib-

uted the unwelcome news that Rush was said to be an athlete, and that he was the champion of boxers and wrestlers while in college. George Hooper said he saw him outrun Pink Kirby, and he was the fastest runner in Crawford. Charley Hooper replied he did not care how fast he could run "provided he was not running towards him." I made no comment myself, but silently wondered if he was built after the pattern of Morris.

The Teacher Arrives.
Our hearts began to palpitate as we heard voices ascending the hill. Fears subsided as we saw a few small boys and girls advancing to the doorstep. A blow of the hammer upon the cap sent them in terror to the brow of the hill. In our eagerness to see the result of our battery, we rushed to the window just in time to recognize the teacher, and in turn to be recognized by him.

I can now see Rush as he boldly approached the door, demanding sternly: "What does all this mean?"

I can now hear the shaky voice of George Hooper answering: "We want a holiday."

"Open the door," demanded Rush, "and we will talk about that afterwards." Seizing the door knob, he gave it a vigorous shake, to be answered by me with another blow on the percussion cap.

"Give us vacation, or enter at your peril!"

At the explosion of the cap, Rush turned and ran as we thought, to a place of safety. He got no further, however, than the rail fence and seizing a rail he returned with a rush, struck a panel of the door with his battering ram, shivered it in a hundred splinters, and sent the demoralized garrison in terror to the opposite wall.

A Good Whipping.
Before a parley could be made, Rush leaped through the breach he had effected, raised aloft in his right hand a seasoned hickory switch and exclaimed: "Come hither!"

One by one, each boy came up and took his medicine like a man. Each one said that he received the usual dose—twenty lashes. While all this was going on, I had been stealthily creeping to the breach in the door, and as I was in the act of escaping, I felt myself grasped by the nape of the neck, swung around in front of the teacher, while he asked: "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Tremblingly I answered: "My name is Tate, and I came over to see the fun."

"Well, it will be mighty funny before you see all that you are going to feel. Did you ever hear of Webster's blue-backed spelling book?"

"Yes," said I, in hopes of postponing his innocent amusement until my Uncle should appear and command the peace. "I spelled through that book before I was six years old."

"Then I suppose you are familiar with the fable of 'Old Dog Tray'?"

"Yes," said I, looking anxiously through the opening for the promised peace maker.

"You can therefore appreciate the moral appended."

Before I could temporize with further words, he gave me a thrashing that almost left me a "frazzle."

When Peace Reigned.
He sat down in his chair exhausted. Pointing first to the hammer now lying on the floor, then to the fastened doors and windows, he patiently awaited the execution of his panto-mime orders. The boys in silence withdrew the nails, hoisted the windows and opened the doors. The box of caps was chucked through a crack in the floor. The discomfited boys sought the softest side of the wooden benches and clandestinely investigated the number and nature of their wounds.

In the meantime I had seated myself in front of him in response to his index finger, and wondered whether he would ever let me depart. Rush went to the door and knocking on the outside with his knife handle, announced "books." The children came in quietly, resumed their books with furtive glances at the teacher to discover his next move.

Arising before me he bade me stand. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Tate. Come and see us of ten." You will find the latch-string of the door always hanging on the outside, just to the right of that broken panel. An revoir!

I seized my hat, ran down the steps to come in contact with my uncle, who had witnessed the whole affair.

"How long a vacation did you get?" he asked. "I hope, Jim, you were not too severe on the teacher, for you know I told you—"

"But I waited to hear no more. My brothers and sisters told me afterwards that I was not seen on the village street for three days."

Became a Noted Divine.
This teacher became one of the most noted divines in the Methodist conference, having the degrees of D.D. and L.L.D. conferred on him by several colleges and universities.

While attending the last conference in Pensacola it was my pleasure to meet the venerable doctor. I mentioned this incident of our early days and he laughed immoderately at its remembrance.

"Did that licking do you any good, Jim?"

I answered: "I have been a school teacher ever since the war."

"Then you and I both ought to be satisfied," replied Dr. Rush.

Dr. Rush has since died, and I shall ever revere his memory for the good that he did unto me.

"Did you ever try to turn out another teacher, grandpa?" innocently asked Billie.

"Do you, like your grandma, take me to be a lunatic?" said I, and Billie, yawning, was soon in the land of dreams.

Man Complains Again.
Clara—Why are you always complaining because I have other callers? You didn't suppose I would cease to be attractive just because we became engaged, did you?

George—No, not exactly; but I did not understand that I was only a member of an underwriting syndicate.

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